

## RESEARCH METHODS

### FIELD RESEARCH AND TYPES OF OBSERVATION

## FIELD RESEARCH

### DEFINITION:

Field research can be considered either as a broad approach to qualitative research or a method of gathering qualitative data. The essential idea is that the researcher goes "into the field" to observe the phenomenon in its natural state or in situ. As such, it is probably most related to the method of [participant observation](#). The field researcher typically takes extensive field notes which are subsequently coded and analysed in a variety of ways.

(Trochim, B. 1999)

## WHAT IS OBSERVATION?

**OBSERVATION** involves looking and listening very carefully. We all watch other people sometimes, but we don't usually watch them in order to discover particular information about their behaviour. This is what observation in social science involves

(Langley, P. 1988)

## TYPES OF OBSERVATION

### Participant Observation

One of the most common methods for qualitative data collection, participant observation is also one of the most demanding. It requires that the researcher become a participant in the culture or context being observed. The literature on participant observation discusses how to enter the context, the role of the researcher as a participant, the collection and storage of field notes, and the analysis of field data. Participant observation often requires months or years of intensive work because the researcher needs to become accepted as a natural part of the culture in order to assure that the observations are of the natural phenomenon.

## TYPES OF OBSERVATION

### Direct Observation

Direct observation is distinguished from participant observation in a number of ways. First, a direct observer doesn't typically try to become a participant in the context. However, the direct observer does strive to be as unobtrusive as possible so as not to bias the observations. Second, direct observation suggests a more detached perspective. The researcher is watching rather than taking part. Consequently, technology can be a useful part of direct observation. For instance, one can videotape the phenomenon or observe from behind one-way mirrors.

## TYPES OF OBSERVATION

### Direct Observation

Third, direct observation tends to be more focused than participant observation. The researcher is observing certain sampled situations or people rather than trying to become immersed in the entire context. Finally, direct observation tends not to take as long as participant observation. For instance, one might observe child-mother interactions under specific circumstances in a laboratory setting from behind a one-way mirror, looking especially for the non-verbal cues being used.

## WHY USE OBSERVATION?

- Observation allows the researcher to study people in their 'natural setting' without their behaviour being influenced by the presence of a researcher.

- Observational data usually consists of detailed information about particular groups or situations. This kind of data can 'fill out' and provide a deeper, richer, understanding than survey work which tends to produce less detailed information about a larger number of people.

- A lot of what people do, they 'take for granted'; they do it 'naturally', they aren't aware of it.

## WHY USE OBSERVATION?

- Some methods only allow for the study of one individual at a time. Observation enables the research to study groups of people together, that is, it allows for the study of interaction between the members of a group.

- An interview, for instance, only shows a person's views at one time. Observation involves the study of groups or situations over time, thus, revealing changes.

- Some groups of people, such as school truants, may not agree to cooperate with methods of research such as interviews. Sometimes observation is the only way of finding out about such groups.

## How can direct observation be used?

- Observation of particular social conditions - for example: your research concerns housing. You walk round a particular area noting down types and conditions of housing

- Observation of people and places - e.g. Interested in any links between attendance at pre-school playgroups and educational achievement. You visit a playgroup and observe the facilities and the activities of children & staff.

- Observation of people in situations where your presence will not affect their behaviour. - e.g. do members of different year groups mix? Do students move their positions from day to day or do they always sit in the same place?

## Why choose participant observation?

When observing you have to interpret what you see. This can be difficult especially when you are in a situation which is strange to you. For example, how might an outsider see a scuffle or an exchange of insult in a school playground. Remember that when you observe situations you must understand what people's behaviour means to them. This is made easier if you are actually joining in with the people or situation you are observing

## How can participant observation be used?

It is unlikely that you will have enough time to get accepted into a group of people you are completely unfamiliar with, so participant observation might be better used in a group or situation you already have some contact with.

Examples:

- Attitudes at work

- The way we do things around here

## Guide to doing observation

Carefully consider what kind of observation might be useful for your research

- What groups or situations would be relevant?

- Is it possible and practical to observe them?

- Should you use direct or participant observation?

- What could you find out from the observation?

## **Guide to doing observation**

Make any arrangements necessary for the observation to take place

- Ask for permission well in advance if you want to arrange a visit
- Plan on which day or days the observation will take place and how long it will last

Plan the headings you will use for your notes on observation.

- Decide exactly what you are trying to find out and work out suitable headings to make notes under

## **Guide to doing observation**

If you are doing participant observation you will have to decide whether to:

- Remain 'hidden' - not tell anyone that you are observing them
- Be 'open' - tell people that you are observing them

## **Guide to doing observation**

### **Do the observation**

- make sure you are properly prepared with paper, pen and a clear idea of what you are looking for.
- Make sure you make the notes as the observation is occurring or immediately afterwards - you don't want to forget what happened.
- Look and listen very carefully
- Remember to try not to influence the behaviour of the people you are observing, so be careful how you take notes.

## **Guide to doing observation**

Analyse and write up the results of your observation

Look through the notes and work out what you discovered

Write up your observation including

- How and why you planned the observation as you did
- How the observation went, including problems you had doing it.
- What you discovered and how this relates to other aspects of your research.
- How would you organise the observation differently if you were to do it again.